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Senators Pursuing a Delicate MX Compromise

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 13 — Senate leaders are drafting a compromise that would give President Reagan the money he wants for building the MX missile but would also place severe restrictions on his ability to spend it.

The details are unclear, but key Senators say there is a growing consensus behind a proposal that would bar the President from actually buying the missiles if both houses of Congress disapproved his plan for a base.

Mr. Reagan has indicated his willingness to discuss alternative methods of basing the MX, and while the White House has yet to give its consent, Senate sources believe that the President will reluctantly accept what the lawmakers put together.

Senators Hopeful of Compromise

Such a compromise, it is felt, would survive negotiations with the House, which has rejected the \$988 million appropriation for the missile, in an eventual conference committee of the two houses.

This unusual procedure reflects a widespread belief on Capitol Hill that the Reagan Administration's current basing plan, to crowd 100 missiles into a 20-square-mile tract near Cheyenne, Wyo., makes little sense and would not survive enemy attack. The plan for closely spaced basing, called "dense pack," is based on the theory that incoming Soviet missiles would destroy one another as they try to reach their targets.

"I'm not for dense pack," said Senator William S. Cohen of Maine, an influential Republican on the Armed Services Committee. "And if the Administration continues to push dense pack

they'll lose the whole thing."

The House voted last week to eliminate \$988 million from the military appropriations bill earmarked for production of the first five MXes. The letters stand for missile experimental. President Reagan reacted angrily to the House action, and vowed to fight for the missile system in the Senate.

According to Representative Joseph P. Addabbo, the Queens Democrat who led the fight against the missile in the House, no Senator is willing to offer an amendment that follows the House lead and simply eliminates the money for the missile. "No one wants a confrontation with the President," he said.

At the same time, most Senators seem unwilling to go along completely with the President and give him the \$988 million with no strings. Hence the move for a compromise, which would allow the President to claim some sort of a victory, while tying his hands.

"What we work out, they'll approve," said Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington, a senior Democrat on the Armed Services Committee.

For now, Representative Addabbo calls the proposed compromise "political gimmickry," explaining, "All it does is give the President a political victory." But the Queens Democrat has demonstrated his ability to count votes, and the odds are that when the issue comes up in a House-Senate conference on the bill, Representative Addabbo will accept the compromise.

Much depends, however, on how the compromise is worded. The White

House and its Senate allies, led by Senator John Tower, Republican of Texas, would like a provision that, in effect, would allow the Republican-controlled Senate to approve the basing system on its own, no matter what the Democratic-controlled House should do. But most lawmakers are holding out for a provision that would require the approval of the system by both houses.

As Sam Nunn, Democrat of Georgia, put it: "When you're spending \$30 or \$40 billion on a weapons system, you ought to have positive, affirmative approval by both houses of Congress in a reasonable time frame."